

Key West Post Office, United States
Custom House, United States
Courthouse and Lighthouse
Quarters (Old Post Office and Customs House)
Front Street
Key West
Monroe County
Florida

HABS No. FL-187

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FLA-187

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS HOUSE,
UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHTHOUSE QUARTERS
(Old Post Office and Customs House)

Location: Front Street, Key West, Monroe County, Florida.

USGS Key West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates 17.418260.2716070

Present Owner
and Occupant: United States Navy.

Present Use: Navy Labor and Employment Office.

Significance: A fine example of late nineteenth century eclectic architecture with features of both the Queen Anne and Richardsonian Romanesque styles.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1889-1891.
2. Architect: William Kerr.
3. Original and subsequent owners: From April 1823 to October 1826 the United States Navy occupied Key West as the base of Commodore David Porter's Anti-Pirate Squadron. The Commodore's personnel quarters originally occupied the site of the Old Post Office. In 1826 the base was moved the Pensacola and the Commodore's quarters were utilized as the Customs House (30th U.S. Congress, p. 23). On September 3, 1833, the proprietors of the island sold all of Square 4, known as the Customs House Lot, to the United States Government. (Monroe County Deed Book B., pp 26-35)

Fifty-five years later on December 15, 1888, the U.S. Government awarded a contract for the present building. The building was completed and occupied in the later part of 1891. The cost, including construction of a sea wall, was \$107,955.96. The U.S. Customs House, Post Office, Courthouse and Lighthouse Quarters were all housed in this building. (Brown, p. 100) In 1932 a new federal building was constructed providing quarters for the Customs House, Post Office, and U.S. Court. The Lighthouse Quarters remained in the old building (Stickney Interview 1965). On December 15, 1932, the Secretaries of the Navy and Department of Commerce entered into an agreement whereby the former Naval Administration Building and Building #1 were exchanged for the Lighthouse Quarters.

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 2)

The building has continued in use as the Naval Administration Building or Building No. 91 until the present time (U.S. Navy, History of the Key West Naval Station).

4. Original plan and construction: A three-and-a-half-story brick building consisting of a central block with two side wings. A single-story gallery surrounded the building on all four sides.
5. Alterations and additions: At some time the galleries around the building on the first floor were walled in to provide more office space. There have been several interior changes, mostly new partitions, made since the building became Navy property. The original stone cornice has been replaced by metal.

B. Historical Events and Person Connected with the Structure::

William Adey Whitehead, born in Newark, New Jersey, a son of William Whitehead, one of the four owners of Key West, drew the survey map of Key West, by which the island was divided among the proprietors. He served as Customs Collector (1830-1838) and Mayor of Key West. Leaving the island in 1838, he was to become one of New Jersey's outstanding men in education. His major interests were history and libraries.

Stephen R. Mallory came to Key West as a young boy with his family in 1823. He served here as Customs Inspector, Customs Collector, and County Judge. In 1850 he was elected United States Senator from Florida. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War he was made Secretary of the Confederate Navy and he served throughout the War. (Dictionary of American Biography, 1937.)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Original architectural drawings: Key West Post Office and Courthouse (Old). Folder #91 (also designated #1216), Record Group 121. Public Buildings Service Records, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. This folder contains the following:

Plan of the Custom House Grounds, Key West, Florida. Scale 40' to 1 inch; red lines show location of fences.

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 3)

Plan, U.S. Naval Station, Key West, Florida. Portion of
Naval Station. Submitted July 2, 1909 (signature
unclear). Insert on map: "Plan of Custom House
Grounds...by Charles W. Tift...(thought to have been made
about 1878) traced by J.M. Haag Mar. 31-03"

Series of approximately 65 prints and blueprints include
details such as: Brick and and stone work, girders and
columns, concrete and piling plan, details of joiner work
and diagram of Post Office Boxes. Also included are:
basement, first, second, third floor plans; front, rear,
end, and Green Street elevations, as well as drawings
no. 60, 61, 62 and 63.

2. Old views: Key West Florida Post Office and Courthouse
(Old). General Correspondence, Letters received (folder
1890-1891), Public Buildings Service. Record Group 121,
Box 123, National Archives and Records Service, Washington,
D.C.

"Southeast Corner, Center Front Showing Crack" January
31, 1891.

"From North Corner" January 31, 1891.

"South Corner" January 31, 1891.

Crane, Horatio, Key West, Florida, Photogravures, The
Albertype Co., New York, 1896.

3. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Key West Florida Post Office and Customs House, Letters
Received, 1843-1910), General Correspondence, Public
Buildings Service, Record Group 121, National Archives
and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

Monroe County Deed Book B, pp. 26-35, 1833.

Territorial Papers of the Florida Territory, 5 vols. U.S.
Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

30th U.S. Congress, Report No. 189, First Section, p. 23.

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 4)

b. Secondary and published sources:

Browne, Jefferson B., Key West, the Old and the New, The
Record Co., St. Augustine, 1912.

U.S. Navy, History of the Key West Naval Station.

4. Interviews:

Stickney, Clyde, Postmaster, 301 Simonton Street, Key West,
Florida. June 7, 1965.

5. Likely sources not yet investigated:

General Services Administration, National Archives and
Records Service, Public Building Service. A History of
Public Buildings Under the Control of the Treasury
Department, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office,
1901.

Prepared by Robert S. Fuller
Old Island Restoration
Foundation, Inc.
HABS Key West Project
September 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. The building exhibits features of the Queen Anne and
Richardsonian Romanesque styles both of which are not
commonly found in the Florida Keys.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: A three-and-a-half story building
approximately 117' by 47'. The building is a central block
with two side wings.

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 5)

2. Foundations: Segmental arches between brick piers with granite bases. Cisterns in basement.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Red brick, plain and molded in common bond. Brick and terra-cotta checkerboard pattern over three arches of front and back. In the peak of the gable on the front there is a patterned terra-cotta area in the center of which is a plaque, also terra-cotta, with an eagle and foliate ornamentation in low relief.
4. Structural system: Brick bearing wall with timbered roof framing. The main floor is supported by metal I beams with shallow brick arches between and on the underside.
5. Porches: A single-story gallery with bands of Richardsonian molded brick arches resting on truncated columns with foliated capitals covers all four sides. The columns in turn rest on granite blocks. Granite steps provide access to the gallery at the front and rear of the building. The gallery on the wings has been enclosed to provide additional office space.
6. Chimneys: Three high, brick chimneys, two flanking the gable roof of the central block at the rear of the building and one on the south side of the gable roof on the central block at the front. The chimneys have corbeled brick caps with stone trim.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Rounded arched entrances at the front and the rear have wood paneled double doors.
 - b. Windows: The windows are arched with a projecting row of bricks forming an extrados archivolt. The top of the arch has been paneled. Five banded arched windows define the third floor level on the front. At the second floor level at the front, the windows are paired. The windows in the original sections are double hung sash with brick mullions; the windows in the partitions enclosing the gallery are modern, double hung sash with no brick mullions. There are five narrow, unglazed openings in the attic on the front.

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 6)

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The central block has a gable roof with stone coping and kneelers. Ther projecting wings have hipped roofs.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Overhanging eaves on the gable roof of the central block habe corbeled brick brackets. The wide overhanging eaves onthe side wings have wood outriggers and are further supported by metal rods. There is a metal cornice on the side wings.
- c. Dormers: Hipped roof, wooden dormers on the north and south wings, small ventilating dormers on the main roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Main Post Office room north of central stair hall. Office and plenum on south side. Additional office space made when galleries on north and south wings of building were enclosed.
 - b. Second floor: Court room in east end of central block. Remainder of space devoted to long north-south hall and offices.
 - c. Third floor: Large room over court room. Small rooms under roofs of side wings.
 - d. Attic floor: Storage areas.
2. Stairways: One central, open well staircase. Carved and painted newel posts and balusters. Granite steps to basement.
 3. Flooring: The first floor is asphalt tile; second, third and attic floors are of wood; basement floors are stone and concrete. Reeded baseboards on first and second floors.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster. Paneled ceiling with enriched trim in Post Office.

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 7)

5. Doorways and doors: Doorways have reeded architrave trim with rosettes. Doorways in Post Office are arched with rounded transoms. Doors are paneled.
6. Decorative features and trim: Columns with foliated capitals and dentiled architraves in main room of Post Office.
7. Heating: Brick fireplaces with terra-cotta trim. Some have been removed; others are covered or the bricks have been painted. The fireplace in the northeast room on second floor has a rounded arched opening flanked by simple pilasters, formed of molded brick, a reeded architrave, modillioned frieze, and foliated cornice of terra-cotta. The brick has been painted. The fireplace in the center front room of the third floor has a segmentally arched opening of molded brick with a modillioned architrave and a frieze with foliated designs and small human heads. It is topped by a black stone slab. Both fireplaces have metal grates with embossed designs.

D. Site:

The building faces east on Clinton Place. It is surrounded by an iron fence. A Coast Guard building is to the north, Key West Naval Station to the south and the Naval Station docks are immediately to the west (rear) of the building.

Prepared by Robert S. Fuller
Old Island Restoration
Foundation, Inc.
HABS Key West Project
June and August 1965

KEY WEST POST OFFICE, UNITED STATES CUSTOMS
HOUSE, UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE AND LIGHT-
HOUSE QUARTERS (Old Post Office and Customs
House)

HABS No. FLA-187 (Page 8)

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. J. Franks Brooks, Photographer, of Key West, supplied the photographs.